

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE


SCIENCE FICTION

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GODS of
the NORTH

A Newly
Discovered Story

By ROBERT
E. HOWARD



WISH UPON A STAR
A Short Novel by
ROBERT F. YOUNG

—
Short Stories by
EVELYN E. SMITH
WALT SHELDON
KENNETH BULMER
WILLIAM C. GAULT

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**their
dreams
remain**

by ... KENNETH BULMER

Somewheres on Mars—that
very old planet that had
once known life—two peo-
ple were facing creation....

SOMEWHERE on Mars—
which had long been over-
looked by go-getting humani-
ty—two people were facing
creation.

"I should have sent you
back to Earth."

"No, Seton. This is right."
Her dewed elfin face turned
up towards him from the bed.
"I stay here on the site, with
you. I know I'm right—I
know."

He beat a scarred fist into
his palm. His eyes burrowed
from their sockets like furtive
tear drops; a big man and vir-
ile yet almost crushed by an
event larger than his experi-
ence. For the event was life.
She had known it longer than
he, treasured it and secured it
against the day when he had
said: "You'll go back to Earth
my girl. I'll book a compart-
ment with Interplanetary.
Just think—green fields and
blue skies after this endless
ochre stink! Man! But I'm
lucky."

She had put one small pink
finger on his arm, ruffling
the hairs, feeling their prick-
ling rebellion with a sensuous
delight in her man. No-one

Kenneth Bulmer, the well known English Science Fiction writer, tells a very old story set against an equally old background, in his sensitive "Their Dreams Remain." Mars was a forgotten world, a dust hole, filthy, decadent, without purpose and inhuman, and still this was where she had chosen to spurn the science Earth offered...and now she waited.... Will this be Mars tomorrow?

had ever done what she proposed. How brave she would have to be no-one could know.

"I'm staying here, Seton."

That was the sum and being of her life. Outside the dome thin acridity of reeking dust swathed the world in a fog of red oppression. Dryness sucked avidly at the man-made dwellings: heat and cold sustained a bitter attack. She had the alienness of her surroundings imprinted on her mind and shared with Seton and the members of the Mars Archaeological Expedition the enervating awareness that they were not wanted upon this planet. Mars was a backwater in galactic culture, a tidal creek that festered with red dust and forgotten hopes and a group of pottering men with tools for excavating a broken dream.

And she had said: "I'm staying here."

"Of course you can't!" Seton had said, half roughly, half jokingly, trying to respond to her fancied mood. "You'll go back to civilization like every other wife. Mars is savage, quite impossible—"

"But I shan't, Seton. I shall stay here."

A hundred times a day he had tried to sway her not able to comprehend the enormity of what she proposed. She kept her mind and will intact like a precious locket, snuggled on her bosom on a thin golden chain, secret, inviolate, sacrosanct. And a hundred times a day they

were vitally conscious of the thin high skirl of the wind and the blowing sand and the marching red ruination that was Mars. D... had buried under meticulous ever changing mounds the glories of a past that had breathed here when men slimed in stagnant pools. Sand had eroded the shining metropolis that man had once attempted to erect on a shifting foundation, and abandoned.

"Stay here? You're crazy!" Seton had thrown up the argument—had battled out into the storm, feeling the vibration of the wind against his suit, increasing the speed of his helmet wipers in blind defiance and cursing all women mad enough to leave civilization for the primitive hell of the diggings.

She had laughed, a tiny, excited, throaty gurgle, and gone back to dreaming.

And now the time was near. So near that the bed fumed in the heat of her writhing. She could feel the stronger fluttering of the new life. Her dark eyes held secrets that were old even before humanity had exploded the way to leave its home planet—who could say that those secrets were not old when the people of Mars had lived here, on this very spot where now a man-made dome huddled beneath the whips of the storm?

"Are you there, Seton?" she said breathlessly, suddenly, like a child bereft of a candle.

"I'm here."

"Hold my hand."

Seton took her slender fingers, covering them with his rock-scarred hands.

"Not long now." His mind probed at his next duty. "Doctor Adams had to hustle in the workings. Number seven pit, late this morning. Shaft collapsed. Just as we were extracting what I think was an artifact that might give us the clue we need."

Despite her own sensitiveness—or because of it—she felt interest. This was her husband's work, this digging and probing into the ochre sandy soil of Mars, laboriously piecing together the scattered fragments of an older civilization. What he turned his brain to, there also she turned hers. The crumpled sheets were hot and feverish against her body.

"Collapsed? Was anyone hurt?"

"No, thank the Lord. But the artifact, whatever it was, disappeared under a hundred or so tons of dust and rock chips. I only caught a tantalizing glimpse of shapes—odd forms—hints at unguessable things." His hand tightened on hers. "Whoever lived on Mars before us died a long while ago. Such a very long while ago."

"And now we live here and try to find out about them." She was conscious of the wheeling wings of destiny, fluttering her blood with the movements of the new life.

She knew Seton was talking to stop himself from thinking about her, and what he had allowed to happen. "Mars is our home, now," she said dreamily. "Just as much as it was theirs—all that time ago."

"How can you lie there and say this hell-hole is our home? As soon as the Expedition is over we'll head back to civilization—"

"Yes, but—"

"—we might not be able to afford to live permanently on Earth; but there are dozens of lovely planets, scattered among the nearer star systems. You'd like Prestonwell—all green and gold—"

She shuddered, her fingers clawing at his hand.

Afterwards, Seton heaved his shoulders lumpily. She could feel his muscles jumping under her fingers. He said, gruffly: "I should have made you go back to Earth."

"You didn't—and you wouldn't. Oh, yes, I know that you could; but in spite of yourself you know that this thing we are doing is our only answer. It is our only challenge to whatever Destiny decided that the old Martians should die. They failed. We must prove we can succeed. You are digging up the past, Seton; together, you and I, we are preparing the way to the future."

Her voice died like sound when an airlock opens.

She twisted into the sheets, gripping them, dragging

them, her eyes wide with the pulsating wonder and shock that vibrated through her in surges of agonizing ecstasy. Moisture beaded her forehead and made a diamond diadem of heart-breaking beauty. She smiled at Seton, gasping for air, straining on his flesh for comfort and strength.

"No, not yet." She nodded weakly, her hair falling about her face. "Give me a drink."

"I can't stand much more of this." The plastic tumbler shook in Seton's hand.

She drank avidly. Inside their tiny dome, pressurized for this occasion to almost Earth normal atmosphere, the universe concentrated and distilled its whole meaning in terms of agony and purification. She knew this dwelling with the lack-lustre familiarity of long-enforced occupation of the body and roving joyous freedom of the spirit.

Seton's tools and equipment, neatly hung beside the airlock with his surface suit. His framed diploma, a dear archaic reminder of printing in an age of micro-film. His massive library of micro-recordings meticulously docketed and tabbed, whole volumes contained in a full stop. Wind etched orange rocks, laughingly brought in as ornaments, amusing in their fantastic configuration. The pervading aseptic smell of canned air, too familiar to be any longer hated, so utterly a part of life.

And, like the things of her

home, she herself, self-dedicated to Seton, freely and joyously, forsaking comfort, seeking only to further his happiness and ambition on the coldly awful surface of Mars.

"When the hell is Doctor Adams coming?"

Seton freed his captive hand, convulsed to his feet like a startled colt, stood palely uncertain, frowning.

"He'll come." She soothed him with the stroking magic of her love. "When it's necessary, he'll come."

"I'm going for him. Anything could happen—"

"Don't fret yourself—"

"Fret! Who's fretting? My God, girl, don't you understand what's happening? If you'd gone to Earth they'd have wheeled you into a hundredth floor surgery and hypnotism would have taken care of everything."

"I don't want to be hypnotised!" She flared the words, her face animated and eyes a shadowed glitter in the grip of her passion. This she believed. "There's too much ultra-efficient machinery and soul-less dynamism back on Earth. They're all robots without the spark of sentiment. A whole planet converted into a single city! It's obscene. Concrete pavements from the Amazon to the Indes. Buy a ticket on the subway and burrow through the Earth's guts from pole to pole. Pity careful trees railed

off with abrupt notices and strips of frightened grass! Can't you see, Seton, Earth is a mechanical monstrosity of rockets and machines and vitamins and television." She lay back, panting slightly.

"We've taken a blind turning somewhere—" she said, frustration making her face a battleground for shadows.

"I know. I know." Seton saw her flushed face with concern. "We agreed to come to Mars in the first place because of our feelings—I only took this job as a sort of reaction to progress, you know that. But this is different. Science can aid you now, as perhaps you've never been aided before. I'm not blind to what science can give. I'm not stifled by the way science is handled to appreciation of what it can do."

"All right—but in this, I'm right."

"You're just a stubborn woman."

"Women know when to be stubborn. They have a knack for it."

"Where the hell is Doctor Adams?"

She reached out a hand, caught his jacket.

"Tell me about the thing you found today."

"What? Oh, that. I told you, the sand buried it and there was no time to see what it was." The memory of that moment flooded back: he brooded alone, cut off from her reaching emotion.

"With all the functional

expressionism of Earth at our disposal you'd think we could shift a few tons of sand easily." He laughed, a saw-cut of sound over the whispering fibrillation of the sand across the dome. "The damned dust poured back so fast you'd think gravity was greater here. Mars, planet of mystery!"

"Don't take on so, Seton. You'll excavate the thing again tomorrow."

"And tomorrow is Earth's today. Don't you see that?"

"Mars is the yesterday of us all. What happened here might have happened on Earth. At least we avoided the bombs and the radioactive dust and the bacteria. We packed our energies into a silver spaceship and rocketed them off to the stars. These poor people of Mars who died so long ago didn't have the necessary vision, or the courage. They introverted their hydrogen bombs and all that is left is outside now—a heap of dust."

"And we come along and violate that dust. Dig it up with our callous shovels and tabulate what we find. Classify a dream? Compartmentalise a hope?"

Seton pulled his surface suit from the rack with a gesture that she recognized.

"I'm going for Adams. I'll drag him here if I have to scour the whole site."

"If you must."

"I must. This is more important now. No-one was hurt

this morning in the collapse. What is the man doing?"

"There are others here besides us, Seton."

"No-one fool enough to be doing what we're doing."

"We're doing the natural thing! I'm tired and frightened of scientific super-gadgets, of running back to the mechanical bosom of mother Earth every time you scratch yourself."

"And now because of that I'm sweating on a representative of that science getting here to help you—"

"Perhaps I don't need his help."

He was appalled. "Not need a doctor? How crazy can you get? Of course you need a doctor and I'm fetching him now."

"And leave me alone?" The mischievous glint in her eyes could not be concealed: she found a delicious secret thrill in thus tormenting him. For all his strength he had weak chinks in his armour.

"Oh, my God—I can't, can I?"

"You want to fetch Doctor Adams, you want to stay here. If you can't reach him on the radio you'd better go quickly before the time comes any closer."

He seized that reprieve.

"It's not yet?"

"Not yet."

"I'll try the radio again but I don't think he's anywhere he can be reached by that." Seton operated the set quickly, delicately. "No, Doctor

Adams is not here." "Not here." "Haven't seen him." "Try tridi reconstruction." "Sorry, Seton, not here."

"I'll try the diggings, he's got to be there. Now take it easy." There was a line of sweat along Seton's forehead, curved, like a scimitar.

The inner airlock valve opened slowly under his pressure and he stepped through with a last look backwards before clamping his helmet ring shut. So like a tiny child setting out on his first day to school—she always had that thought when Seton left the dome, the effect heightened by the solemn play-acting ritual of the airlock. As the inner door closed the cycling light went a deep ruby and she could hear the shush and thrump of the pumps. She leaned across the crumpled bedclothes and switched on the radio again.

Seton's voice came muffled by static.

".....can you hear me?"

"Yes, Seton. I hear you. Don't be long."

"Go on, weaken my resolution."

"What's it like out there?"

"A picnic. There's a storm brewing. The massif even has a cloud cap which means we're in for some of what Mars calls weather. I'm going as fast as I can but the damned dust slithers all over the place. Give me the concrete pavements of Earth."

"You know you don't mean that. Where could you see

what you're seeing now?"

"In a sensitheatre, that's where."

"Artificial, mechanistic, callous—" She stopped speaking, then, as pain cascaded. She must keep that out of her voice: Seton had enough to bear without that.

His answering grunt carried no conviction that she had made a point. "I'll give Adams something for bringing me out in this."

"He's going to have to come out in it," she said after a pause, when her body had joined itself together again.

"That's his job."

"Ah yes, his job. Part of the science you worship."

"I don't worship it, woman. Just because you're cluttered up with a back-to-nature movement doesn't mean that I'm a mad myopic scientist. I just happen to believe that science can do good—witness the state you've got me in by ignoring it."

"What sort of argument is that?" Her voice keened suddenly low and she doubled with the hacking pain. Faster, now. The plastic tumbler was cool and smooth under her feverish fingers.

"You all right?"

She managed to gasp: "Yes. I'm all right."

The pains flooded again, rolling surges that washed through her body and carried her senses swimming on the crest of vertigo. She tried to smile, and her teeth gritted with the effort. How much

longer? Now that the time was almost here she wished frantically that Seton was with her. She should not have let him go. She should have gone to Earth. She couldn't face the event without him.

"Seton!"

"Yes? Is it—?"

"I'm—all—right." Her jaw muscles petrified and the perspiration slicked from her face, sallow and drawn.

"This damned wind. The storm's blowing up into a real stinker. I can hardly see where I'm going. I wonder whether Adams will be able to get out at all—but he will. I'll see he does." Seton's voice dipped and slurred through the rising static, all mingled with and mixed up by the roaring in her ears and the pain that hammered a grip of torment around her body.

Almost immediately afterwards it seemed she was lying half off the bed, the sheets caught round her body, the pain gone and a tiny, remote voice calling: "*Starship Polaris calling Mars. Come in please.*"

She realized vaguely that she must have struck the radio in falling knocking it off frequency. In a burst of panic at being cut off from Seton she twiddled the knobs and brought in the loud drowning mush and staccato clamour of static. She thrust at the radio desperately.

"*Venus calling GanymedeHallo Earth!Asteroid*

MG8-9439 reported assaying eighty five percent U235.... Hallo Mars!.... "Bonny babies demand Gloobo".... Siri-an Ambassador pleased with progress ... Hallo Mars!.... Hallo Mars!"

She lay back weakly on the bed, too listless to care further. All alone. She was all alone to face her supreme ordeal. Strangely the pain had receded—temporarily, temporarily!—leaving her drifting on a rosy cloud of imaginings. She could not feel her body. It was cut off, remote. Seton was out there, in the Martian night, head down against the raging sand, trudging through the project domes looking for the doctor—he would come? He had to!

She knew now, acknowledged with the bitter taste of failure, that she should have gone to Earth, succumbed to the obstetricians and hypnotists, accepted the fact that women always had cool efficient scientific help when their time came.

Only this time she had rebelled, had called a halt to the inexorable automation of humanity. Struck a blow for womanhood. *If only it had not been so painful...*

Mars was a forgotten world. A hunting ground for the archaeologist seeking scraps of a past glory it had no relation to the present day. Today's wonder was out there among the stars, riding wings

of flame carrying mankind's dreams throughout the galaxy. Mars was a dust hole, filthy, decadent, without purpose and entirely inhuman.

And it was on this world that she had chosen to spurn the science Earth offered—

"Seton!" She screamed as the pains tore at her again, sevenfold more terrible after their absence.

Then, with such an overwhelming feeling of horror that she was shocked into an utterly clear appreciation of her position—it began. This, of course, was the end. Quite calmly, allowing her body to act as it would, relaxing, she lay back to await that end. She would die. Why fight longer, when she had proved herself a failure, degrading the very thing she had fought for? *But she hadn't known what it would be like...*

Through the mists that swooned her eyes she saw the cycling light glow like some precious gem set in the forehead of some pagan god. *Too late...* The inner airlock valve opened. A spacesuit with the frost of cold dissipating in fantastic curlicues of exotic shapes bundled through, then Seton had removed his helmet and was stumbling towards her.

"Oh, my God!" he said. "My God!"

"It's no good, Seton—"

"Doctor Adams injured himself clearing the sand—he can't come!" Seton said

wildly. A woman pushed past him, her face a mask covering a sick revulsion.

"I'll do what I can," she said chokingly. "What I can."

"Don't worry." Poor Seton. And this woman, too. She should have had the attendance of science, the trappings of mechanical childbirth: her foolish pride, fallen on the broken reed of her body at the first onslaught of nature, had failed so easily. Strangely, Seton did not mirror her sentiments. He was fumbling with a dusty object. He turned towards her, his face radiant with hope and belief.

"Look," he said hoarsely, offering the thing for her to see. "Look. This is the thing that was buried in the sand. Doctor Adams got it out with the aid of a bulldozer and the wind. See—it is a gift to us from the old people who lived here."

She tried to see clearly through the mist and pain.

"This has been buried under the sand of Mars for unknown thousands of years," Seton said. "And we find it today, this day of all days, as though it had been laid by

especially for us. The wonder of that we can't begin to understand. But I can understand what you wanted to do, your distrust of science—and this is a token, from the forgotten past, to tell us that we need a new belief, a visionary welding of all our pasts and the scientific promise of the future."

Through the pains that now came in regular and rapid strokes she looked bemusedly at the ancient Martian artifact.

"Fight," Seton was saying in words stronger than a prayer. "Fight. You'll be all right, you have this to do now not only for us—but for the many poor ancient dead Martians."

She saw the Martian thing dug from the sand and she tried to speak, tried to tell Seton that she understood, that she would fight. Her words were very faint and quivering.

"I will," she said. "I—see—it. A cradle."

"From the dust, a cradle for our child," said Seton very gently.

